

The Judaica Art of Shully Ratson

Illustrated Jewish texts Made by a Contemporary Artist

In Depth Description and Analysis

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The art of Ornamenting Hebrew writings – a historical and artistic

introduction

Ms. Shully Ratson's initiative to create artistic handwritten Jewish texts in the field of Judaica is highly important and worthy of praise.

The hand writings which she has ornamented and illustrated in recent years are already displaying a wide range of new materials that are indicating an exploration of new paths and creation in Judaic art, while building upon and acknowledging past traditions and artistic styles that are enhancing her work, while providing enjoyment to its readers.

In doing so, Ms. Ratson is continuing a Judaic tradition of hundreds of years. The work of inscribing holy books is a distinct field of the works of art in the Judaic culture and tradition throughout the generations. It is apparent that even in the famous lost Cairo documents included

discovered fragments of marvelous handwritten holy books created in Israel and in Egypt between the 10th and 11th century. These writings were made on parchments by highly skilled writers and were later illustrated by the top artists of the time. These illustrations indicate a link to the Islamic arts that were incredibly dominant at that time throughout the east, where the majority of Jewish people used to live.

In middle age's Europe, Jewish Patrons of the biggest and wealthiest Jewish communities viewed getting their hands on luxurious editions of the entirety of the bible, Pesach Haggadah booklets, and even various writings regarding Halacha (such as the Rambam's "Mishna Torah" or "Arba'ah Turim" by Jacob Ben Asher) to be highly valuable. These texts were exclusively copied just for them and were

later handed to Jewish (and Christian) Artists so that they could use their skills to illustrate them and enhance the visual experience of reading them. Both the Rabbis and the heads prominent Jewish communities encouraged these endeavors, and some of them have even recommended the ornamentation of such writings with gorgeous miniatures. That is what the great Sage Isaac Ben Moshe

Halevi that is known as Profiat Duran from Catalonia (13550 – 1415)

has written in his book "*Ma'aseh Ephod*": (couldn't find the quote)

The Hebrew writings decorated with miniatures were created mostly between the 13th and 15th century throughout Europe, mostly in Jewish communities across Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. It is important to note that these writings are considered to have

a prestigious and important historical status, especially in the history of books, and they are held as highly valuable objects in the most important libraries around the World – such as the national library in Paris, the British library in London and even the Vatican library in Rome.

After the invention of Gutenberg's printing press, the Jewish Communities in Europe experienced something that was against the norm in most other societies – they did not stop creating ordinary and artistic handwritten writings for centuries. The invention of the printing press could not affect the intricate craft of making Jewish texts, tefillin and even Mezuzahs, and they are all still handmade to this day in a very similar fashion to how it was made hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Furthermore, it is not just Sofers who are still using similar

methods, many different kinds of Jewish writers have continued to write various kinds of texts on parchments such as the book of Esther (and by that I mean personal Megillahs that are not Halachically required to be written on Parchment, and not the kind of Megillah that will be read by a cantor in public), Jewish Marriage contracts (In Italy for example, every single one was written on parchments) Passover Haggadahs, personal prayer books, prayer booklets for women (a thing that flourished mostly in 17th century Germany), Seder Birkat Hamazon, Seder Tikonei Shabbat, Pirkei Shira, Mohel books, amulets, Eastern boards and calendars for Omer counting, guides for holy sites, and sometimes even The 5 Megillahs, Haftara books, different certifications and documentation (Rabie, Mohel,

Shoichet, Doctor) and various other handwritten texts for many different uses.

Another great revival of the art of Jewish bookmaking – both in the fields of handwritten books and print – began in the 20th century.

Numerous Jewish artists from Europe, the United States and Israel have created new Books inspired by the modern art of their time, along with more conservative ornaments. Some examples of an early modernist Haggadahs are the one made by the Jewish-German Artist Otto Geismar, that was printed in Berlin in 1928, or The Haggadah made by the woodcutter and artist Jacob Steinhart (Berlin, 1923), and his illustrations clearly reflect the dark aesthetic of German Expressionism. Other important Artists include Joseph Budko, known

for his unique Graphic style (Germany and Israel), Arthur Szyk (Poland and the U.S) that created illustrations in the style of miniatures from the Middle Ages, Saul Raskin and Siegmund Forst in the United States, that have even included the Holocaust in traditional handwritten texts. Even the Jewish American Artist Ben Shahn created his own Haggadah in his unique and contemplative style in 1958.

Israeli artists also began to ornamate traditional Jewish and Hebrew Texts inspired and enhancement by their time's artistic culture and movements. Some of them highlighted messages that are related to the revival of Nationality in Israel – such as the Haggadahs by Nahum Gutman (Tel Aviv, 1950) and Arie Allweil (Tel Aviv, 1950), that also created the first illustrated Haggadah for IDF Soldiers. Among

them stand out some Bezalel alumni such as Ze'ev Raban that illustrated the Song of Songs and the book of Ruth, as well as Shmuel Ben David that illustrated the book of Esther and incorporated stylistic captioning that highlighted the natural landscapes of Israel and the Zionist and Jewish fulfilment spirits. In the last generation, there has been another renaissance of artists that have steered the public eye into the achievements of the Hebrew/Jewish handwritings of previous centuries, such as the hand written Haggadah (which was also published in print) by the Israeli – American Artists David Moss (1983), and the Haggadah made by one of the founders of the kinetic Arts Yaacov Agam (1993) and by the folk artist of Moroccan decent Rafael Abecassis (2002) which his work consists of colorful and Sephardic motives, or even most recently the Haggadah by Jerusalem Artist

Avner Moriah (2003) that uses motifs from ancient Sephardic art.

Other kinds of texts are also gaining some artistic attention –however milder than Haggadahs – which include Pirkei Avot, the book of Esther (or Five Megillahs) Psalms, Kiddush books and more.

Part B: The ornamentation of Jewish Texts by Shully

Ratson

Alongside the works of the artists previously mentioned in the previous section, began a similar revival in the ornamentation and illustration of traditional Jewish texts by members of the orthodox community over the last two decades. An interesting aspect of these new works is that most artists and creators are Orthodox Women.

While there have been a small number of well-known Jewish female

artists in the past – their stories are extremely unique and rare.

Furthermore, they are known as a singular example that is only known

to us today and did not receive proper recognition during their

lifetime. One of these women is Sha'atlina Bat Menachem, who

illustrated the book of Esther in 1564 Venice (which is one of the

earliest known books of Esther– the craft of ornamenting the

Megillahs were developed among the Jewish communities in Italy

during the Renaissance and was inspired by heightening the status of

Esther and her place among the Italian Renaissance culture.) Another

rare example is the Haggadah which includes figurative Images in the

classical Italian Style that was created in Frankfurt in 1842. The

Haggadah's illustrator (the text was written by a Sofer living at the

time) was Charlotte von Rothchild, a member of the well-known

Rothchild family, and her art collection that she has gathered over the years heavily inspired her illustrations of the Haggadah (which is currently kept in a private art collection in Zurich).

This tradition now includes the Orthodox Artist Shully Ratson.

Ms. Ratson is undoubtedly one of the most central figures in this

group of female artists from the Jewish Orthodox community who illustrate and ornament Jewish handwritten texts with great talent and incredible attention to every single detail, working alongside a Sofer that writes the text which they later masterfully bless with their talents.

These women all have a family, more than often with a large number of children, but despite their limited time and many different duties for their families, feel a longing and crave for enhancing these texts with

their art, which captures the hearts of contemporary audiences while enriching their understanding and connection to their Jewish heritage and culture. In my humble opinion, there will come a time in which we will discuss these creations and artists as a new artistic Escola with a prominent status among the history of Judaica art as a whole, and more specifically the art of ornamenting Jewish texts.

Ms. Ratson have studied and specialized in graphic design and have even worked professionally as a graphic designer. But as time went on, she felt that there is not enough space for self-expression in that field, at least not as much as other art forms or artistic endeavors that she was interested in. She was exposed to a variety of different visual art forms, studying among prominent tutors and professors in

the illustration and painting fields. Enhancing her skills have led her to search for a tool of self-expression, specifically in the field of Judaica art. The solution was ultimately found in the field of ornamenting Jewish texts, in which the artist could rely on her previous specialties and channel them into a path that was more suitable for her artistic expression, which also allowed her to express her craft and talents by stepping inside the word of Judaism and to experience the spiritual joy and fulfilment accompanied to that activity. This new field has also required her to specialize and study various other techniques and further control of skills related to illustrations, including use of parchment, gilding and the craft of ornamentation on top of large dynamic and irregular surfaces (such as in the case of the book of Esther) while also gaining insight and experience in analyzing Jewish

texts, their meanings and themes, and the skill of diving into the narrative layers of each and every story while trying to imagine what will be the best way to illustrate it for a contemporary audience.

In the next couple of lines, we will discuss and briefly examine the main works which Ms. Ratson has created so far. These texts were written by a Sofer using top quality materials, and were then illustrated and ornamented by the artist.

1) Megalith Esther with Narrative Scenes (2017)

This megillah is characterised by long texts consisting of 28 lines each written in Ktav Ashuri (which means the letters are ornamented in tags – three tags, one tag or no tags) – according to the tradition of

writing Torah books, Tefillin and Mezuzahs. This is a kind of Megillah known as the “King’s Megillah” – meaning that every possible column (starting from the second one) opens with the word “King”, which refers to king Achashverosh in the text, but is considered to be a hint to G-D in the Jewish tradition, whose name is not specifically mentioned in the Megillah, being present at the top of each column in order to guide and watch over what is happening in the text. It is worth mentioning that taking that parameter into consideration requires the writer to have great skill, planning and sometimes even expanding the letters, to reach the desired result.

Ms. Ratson’s Illustrations can be divided into three categories in this Megillah: First and foremost are the little images at the bottom of

the text, just like Italian Megillahs from the Baroque period. Every image is framed within a reoccurring octagon shape, in which there is an illustrated and colorful scene from The Book of Esther capturing what's happening in the column above it. The scenes, both figuratively and realistically, describe the events of the Megillah by chronological order. It is mainly inspired by Traditional Jewish art from the Baroque period, but the different characters have an eastern look (although some Baroque artists such as Rembrandt have incorporated eastern elements in their works). At the top of the Megillah appears an image that takes the entire column – Mordechai dressed in royal clothes while riding a horse, the City of Shushan and its landscape appears in the background in a Persian – Muslim style.

The second and third types of decorating the Megillah is mostly ornamental. At the top of each column there is a lunette in which there is a birdlike figure, a different bird in each of the columns. The use of birds can lead to several possible interpretations – they can symbolize the freedom which the Jews of Shushan and the other countries living under king Achashverosh longed for, and eventually got because of Esther's and Mordechai's heroic efforts. The Third is a variety of golden ornaments that are visually enhancing every column. These ornaments are incredibly delicate and gentle and were made by either China Steel or with the use of gentle filigree craft.

2) The book of Esther with the main characters of the Megillah (2019)

This Megillah consists of 6 parchments that are 47 cm high. The ten chapters of the Megillah were written by a Sofer who made sure all the tags and rules are being kept in the necessary words and letters.

Furthermore, this Megillah, just like the previous one we mentioned, is in the style of "The King's Megillah". Every column of text has 21 lines – except the one which includes the list of Haman's Children, which consists of 11 lines as required by The Jewish Halacha.

The illustration and ornamentation of the Megillah by Shully Ratson was hand made with acrylic paint, and in a way that incorporates various styles, the main ones being the Art Novo with the combination of ornamental elements from Muslim and Eastern Art. The

compositions and variety of illustration topics evidently point to

a completely different artistic approach than the previous

Megillah, and frankly from any Megillahs by other artists, both

currently and in the past. There are no small narrative scenes at the

top or bottom of each column as often found in Italian or Dutch

Megillahs. There is also no dominant Megillah ornamentation

approach from Muslim countries such as Morocco, Iraq, or eastern

countries like India where there are Geometrical, floral or architectural

ornaments – but no human characters. Instead of these traditional

ornamentation styles we find here some “Bigger than Life” Megillah

Heroes. The columns take up about a third of the height of the

parchment, while the heroes of the Megillah are shown over the

whole parchment – meaning above the columns, below it and next to

it. in this way the columns are being “controlled” from every corner by

large characters painted in bright and powerful colors, dominated by shades of green and red that immediately capture the attention of the reader. The characters appear from both sides of the columns and seem to have a "dialogue" with one another. In the last column for example, Esther is on the right side of the column, dressed in carefully ornamented royal clothes, while wearing a head covering resembling the Gargush, the unique head covering of Jewish brides in Yemen; Esther is holding a big feather and gestures towards the image of Mordechai appearing on the left side of the column, (also dressed in Royal clothes in shades of green and red) and with the aid of a young man they are holding a large red Megillah that has Golden floral symbols. The Megillah that they are holding is spread out so that Esther's words could appear, as the Passage States: "Then Queen

Esther daughter of Avihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordecai the Jew" (Esther 9: 29).

For further enhancement of these scenes and for the continuity of the storie's meaning in the new age, there is a child facing outwards while holding Mordechai's cloak (which hints at the continuation of the Jewish tradition for the next generations), while holding a Grager – a relatively new symbol of Purim (typical of previous Generations of Ashkenazi Jews). A similar effort has been made in other columns when there are several Characters throughout the Gaps of the Megillah that are even occasionally having dialogues with the heroes of the Megillah. *It is undoubtedly a revolutionary and ground-*

breaking Megillah that presents an original and fresh perceptive in

Illustrating the Heroes of the book of Esther.

3) An Ornamented Pirkei Avot

“Pirkei Avot” – The Ninth tractate in the torts section of the Mishna, is one of the most beloved and most read texts in the Jewish tradition. It is partly because, unlike other tractates in the Mishna, this tractate deals with topics that are relevant for each and every one of us – ethical dilemmas, acts of kindness and bedside manners. Therefore, it has been replicated and copied many times over the years – both in handwriting and in print. Furthermore, there are countless of interpretations and analyses by the greatest Jewish thinkers from the Middle Ages and onwards (The Rambam’s interpretations were even

written as a separate essay named "8 Chapters of the Rambam"). The Mishna was even translated to different dialects and languages spoken by Jews all over the World such as Hebrew- Arabic, Yiddish, and Ladino (following the tradition of reading Pirkei Avot in Shul on every Shabbat after the Mincha, Sephardic Jews who spoke Ladino loved to read the Chapter of that Particular Shabbat by a certain Arabic Musical scale or Macham, and then the translated Ladino Version of it). its popularity is also evident by the work of Professor Avigdor Shinan, **Pirkei Avot: a New Israeli interpretation** (The AVI CHAI foundation and Yediot Books), that ever since its publishing in 2009 have reappeared in multiple new editions and was sold in record high numbers.

As a new addition to this valuable tradition, it is incredibly refreshing to see a new artistic edition of "Pirkei Avot" that was masterfully made by a contemporary artist that have incorporated the best of her skills and talents in making this

work. It is a text made by 39 parchment pages, just like the handwritten texts in the Middle Ages, wrapped in a leather covering ornamented in decorative rings. The pages of the book are double sided – meaning that they were written on only one side of the parchment , that is always attached to another piece of parchment (therefore there are 68 Parchments overall) and that gives each page of text and ornament its proper respect and status without eclipsing any other page and so one (a similar approach was dominant in the grand handwritten text of the middle ages such as the famous

Sarajevo Haggadah”, and in the 20th century was the significant Haggadah of the Jewish Artist Arthur Szyk in a similar fashion). The Text of the Mishnah appears in these sections that are separated from each other and are accessible for an immediate and clear reading experience as independent units, and it is evident that the Hebrew punctuation and grammar systems, that do not appear in numerous other editions, is of great help to that feature.

Every single page of Shully Ratson’s “Pirkei Avot” is designed in an individually unique way from the page preceding it and from one proceeding it. There is great attention to detail and use of ornamental enhancements alongside with narrative scenes in realistic styles inspired by Neo-Classical paintings of the 19th century. The paintings

were made with oil paints, alongside with Tempera and the gilding of golden leaves of around 23 karats. The Chazal texts quoted in the book are separated by golden ornamented lines. At the top of each section there is an opening letter ornamented and gilded on a decorative background. Frame ornaments in the shape of horizontal lines with plant models and other ornaments are spread all over the pages. Alongside these were also added figurative miniatures of a wide range – Sages in eastern clothing sitting around the table and discussing a certain topic or issue, the children of Beit Rabban with curly Payot learning Torah and many others. In other pages there are illustrations of animals and birds. Among them there is a Deer that may symbolize the line: “Judah Ben Tema said, Be strong as a leopard,

and swift as an eagle, and fleet as a gazelle, and brave as a lion, to do the will of your father who is in heaven” (Pirkei Avot 5:20).

Every chapter opens with a decorated page which has the chapter number with a golden letter. The ornament is surrounded by a frame created by paper cutting with a plant motif. The pages are harmonious and symmetrical and are based on a system of concentrative circles with a square frame. At the last page, over a background of golden leaves appears an image of a bird flying into the heavenly–abstract background around it into the unknown.

Summing all of this up, this book is pleasant to read through and contains a dearly beloved and familiar text accompanied by

illustrations and ornaments that are enhancing the reading experience.

4) The Song of Songs in Rainbow Colors (2018)

In the Jewish tradition and culture of the past, it was frowned upon to illustrate The Song of Songs as a separate text or Megillah. There are some illustrations done by hand in the Middle Ages (from Germany and Spain for example), but mostly in handwritten prayer books from Ashkenazy Jewish communities in Italy. These prayer books made by artists in the Middle Ages created interesting and unique allegories in the history of Judaica art – whether that be illustrations that compliment a specific text or a piyyut (liturgical poem) inspired by The Song of Songs (for example the piyyut “iti melevanon kala”). In the

Baroque period there were often lines taken from The Song of Songs in marriage contracts, and among the Jews of Italy it was common to write down the entire text in a micrography on the back of the marriage contract's parchment. It was Only in the 20th century that artists began to illustrate the song of songs as a separate text, as well as using illustrations that expressed the artistic culture and influence of their time. Among them was "Bezalel" Ze'ev Raban who published an illustrated edition of the text in 1923, which had illustrations that incorporated an eastern style (a specialty of Raban) alongside with images of the Israeli natural landscape.

Despite this revival in the new age, there are still very few artists that illustrate the Song of Songs, and even less so in the shape and style of

a Megillah. Therefore, Shully Ratson should be congratulated and

cherished for creating an artistic Megillah in this field. The

megillah with the title “The Song of Songs Megillah in Rainbow

Colors” is composed of three parchments that are 40 centimeters tall.

The 8 chapters of the text were written by a Sofer, and the calligraphic

letters are ornamented with either one or two tags, as required by the

Jewish tradition. The illustrations were made by the artist with acrylic

paints combined with tempera and gliding with golden leaves of 23

Karats. Every one of the Megillah columns is framed with an

ornamental frame based on the motif of plants – gently wrapped

around each other in every color of the rainbow. These beautiful

frames were made with great detail and talent that indicate

great skill and control of lines, color, ornamentation and

incorporating guilloches. In addition to the ornaments, the artists added illustrations and miniatures – one at the top of the Megillah and another at the very end. These are miniatures with Naturalist scenes without any human figures that are related to Jerusalem – at the top of the Megillah there is a garden full of trees, and alongside it an ancient wall and a tower similar to the tower of David; at the end of the Megillah appear the mountains of Jerusalem romantically illustrated in earthly shades with olive trees growing on top. The scenery of Jerusalem provides a romantic atmosphere fitting with King Solomon's song and the promise of love made by a woman from Jerusalem: "I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem! If you meet my beloved, tell him this: That I am faint with love" (song of songs 5:8)

5) The Song of Songs Megillah – The Megillah made with lace

For background about the song of songs in Judaica art – go to the previous section

Recently another Megillah of the Song of Songs was made by Ms. Shully Ratson. Just like the previous Song of Songs Megillah that we just discussed, this Megillah is also made of Three ornamented parchments, and their overall height is 38 centimetres. The Megillah is written by a Sofer who made sure to include the proper tags and letters, just like in Torah books, tefillin and mezuzas. The columns of the text are 21 lines each and around them very wide edges. These edges were preplanned and have been used by the artist as a

decorated platform for the columns of texts, which gives them a more lively and graceful look.

The ornamented platform is hand decorated with a technique of tempera and gentle lace work. The surface around the text was illustrated at first with soft impressionist sceneries of bright and gentle shades, moving swiftly and gracefully all over the three parchments.

On top of the first layer, the artist has used the parchment as a standalone blind element – the parchment was cropped as a soft laced fabric with figures of plants and ornaments that are catching the eyes of the viewer all over the text's columns. *The work in these*

sections, that has required great caution both in planning and in execution, is magnificent in its accuracy, perfect symmetry, and

in the rhythmical elements of the motifs with astonishing detail

and care. The models created with the bright parchment with the colorful scenery in the background are creating a powerful impression, and the viewers feel as if they are looking at the landscape of genesis with a surface of lace or a very gentle covering – as something so close but at the same time beyond our conception of time and out of reach. *Reading and looking at this incredibly unique Megillah will*

undoubtedly provide the reader with a realistic and

transformative experience.

In conclusion, Ms. Shully Ratson's body of work in the field of

illustrating handwritten Jewish texts are indicative of a mature

artist who is incredibly aware of the values and traditions

accompanying her work.

After many years of studying and becoming proficient in various techniques, control in different artistic styles which have helped form her individual artistic expression, Ms. Ratson took her talents to the field of illustrating handwritten Jewish texts. This field is a perfect match for her talents and skills, while at the same time opening a path towards expression of important values in the world of Judaica art, as well as in her own personal creation. Her deep focus and understanding of the texts and their messages are inspiring her decorative ornaments alongside with narrative scenes illuminating the text and “translating” the words into eye catching scenery and landscapes. Her use of different styles evidently points to an eclectic

artist, and her use of motifs and patterns from both western art, Islamic art and ornamentation, composed and signifies the visual expression of these cultures. At the same time, this eclectic nature is being used to serve the message and aesthetical values of the chosen handwritten text, and eventually become a standalone independent artistic creation.

The result is that every single handwritten text is a beautiful and heartwarming Judaica item, pleasant to look at and provides the viewer with a transformative aesthetical and spiritual experience.

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